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ABSTRACT

Questions are raised about conventional notions of social work education by introducing field-derived data of how social workers use knowledge in everyday worklife, particularly in the field. Two typical social work units (public and private) totalling 24 social workers were the main foci for data collection, and additional subjects and social work units were sampled. Data collection methods included observations, participant observation, structured and unstructured interviewing, and use of archival materials. Six different but overlapping types of knowledge were distinguished, and seven sources or agents were found to be instrumental in the creation of useable practice knowledge and understanding. The six types of knowledge covered: resources and how to get them; substems and how to access them; how to get knowledge; self-knowledge and how one learns; formal knowledge; and coping knowledge. It is apparent that some types of practical knowledge are not recognized as legitimate knowledge. The interaction between kinds of knowledge and agents of knowledge development suggests that a new model of teaching needs to be considered. Much learning of social work practice occurs in unplanned situations that are not organized for the purpose of learning. Present educational approaches need to be supplemented with some alternatives (e.g., developing and improving the field-based learning or practice that schools of social work already incorporate into their program designs). Contains 9 references. (SM)

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Knowledge Utilization in Social Work Practice: Implications for Education and Staff Development

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to raise questions regarding conventional notions of social work education by introducing field-derived data of how social workers use knowledge in everyday worklife.

Methodology

The general guiding research question was "How do social workers use Knowledge in the field?" In retrospect, the question, as posed, was misleading. It assumed a linearity of learning from classroom to practice which, under closer scrutiny, was a poor caricature of how this sample developed and used Knowledge in the field

Two typical social work units (one public and one private), comprising a total of 24 social workers were the main foci for data collection, although additional subjects, and other social work units, were sampled according to the dictates of theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory provided the theoretical underpinnings of the study (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, Schatzman and Strauss, 1973; Bogdan and Taylor, 1975). A review of the literature had ascertained that a well-developed model or theory of professional knowledge utilization did not exist and a substantive theory (Glaser and Strauss,) was called for.

To the degree possible, the concepts of complimentary methods and triangulation (Denzin, 1970) were embraced. Data collection methods

included observations, participant observation, structured and unstructured interviewing, and the use of archival materials. Interviews and meetings were taped wherever possible and systematic field notes maintained. Taped material was transcribed.

Data were analyzed over a three year period beginning with entry into the research sites. The method of constant comparison and the process of confirmation and disconfirmation of emergent categories and properties (Glaser and Strauss), were used throughout the data collection and analysis phases.

Findings

As many as six different but overlapping types of Knowledge could be distinguished in this study, and as many as seven "sources" or agents were found to be instrumental in the generation of useable practice Knowledge and understanding. The role these sources played seemed to vary by the phases or stages in which ideas, understandings and facts moved from vague recognition to becoming integrated into the social worker's practice repetoire. Furthermore, the seven agents served different functions in what seemed to be a process of management of certitude.

1. Six types of Knowledge. When asked about the difference between Knowledge, skills and attitudes, this sample could not make clear distinctions. To them it was all rolled up into one, namely "practice", which included "Knowing " as well as "Knowing how to". The six types of Knowledge were labelled (a) Knowledge about resources and how to get them; (b) Knowing about subsystems and how to access them; (c) Knowledge about how to get Knowledge; (d) Knowledge about oneself and how one learns, (e) formal Knowledge (why people/groups/ communities do what they do, and how they can be changed); and (f) coping Knowledge. Social

workers did not label these Kinds of Knowledge - the labels were derived from observations and interviews. Usually, when they are presented with such a breakdown of types of Knowledge, practitioners can validate them from their own experiences, even though they could not previously identify them.

Several observations can be made here. First, other authors have noted that professionals such as teachers (Eraut, 1988) and nurses (Benner, 1984) use general types of Knowledge which here-to-fore have not been codified, and which can be dubbed "practice wisdom". Second, these "Knowledges" are somewhat akin to what Schon (1987) has called "Knowing in action", which are professional actions, decisions and judgements which are done without thinking, professionals are unaware that they learned to do them, and they cannot describe the Knowledge base from which the actions stem. Third, the continual disagreement between schools of social work and the field as to what constitutes "real" social work Knowledge may be somewhat akin to the parable of the blind man and the elephant. Each is convinced that they know what constitutes social work Knowledge when each only views a portion of the totality. Epistemologically speaking, professional schools have traditionally codified and legitimized professional Knowledge, and by having this socially sanctioned power, may be ignoring some of the more "mundane" Knowledge which practitioners use in every day practice but which, in fact, they are encouraged to ignore as somehow lesser Knowledge.

2. Seven Knowledge-building agents

During the field study, I had to, as researcher, abandon the implicit model which I carried with me as an educator. This model assumed that in linear fashion, Knowledge taught in pre- and post-qualification study

made its way linearly to the field and application in practice. Instead, I found I had to use metaphors such as a huge pot full of ingredients which continued to bubble away. During that time, certain ingredients would move to the top, only to be overtaken by other ingredients. I could detect nothing linear nor terribly systematic by which practitioners used their ingredients (Knowledge) for practice problems. In fact, at times one had a sense that the product of the stew was very context-specific and looked nothing like what was taught in schools of social work. Knowledge and Know-how was being developed, but often it was because of unique conditions, interactions and oftentimes sheer serendipity which occurred in the field.

Instrumental in this "field-grown" Knowledge were colleagues, supervisors, other professionals, external and internal print, clients and client files, and formal education. Practitioners are constantly consulting their peers, or other professionals, checking procedures or intervention approaches in articles, books, or manuals, or attending various formal courses. But rather than "receiving" new Knowledge, they seem to be seeking to make sense out of practice problems and concerns which they are facing. They selectively choose from the various sources "input" which helps them "get clear" or "be certain" that what they are doing, or plan to do, is the best approach. This process, I have labelled "certainty management" in which practitioners try to make some sense out of multiple and often conflicting options, facts and ideas which they face in everyday practice.

3. Sources serve several functions. In this aforementioned "certainty management", practitioners could be observed not only consulting various "sources", but they described these agents as serving different functions at different times. For example, colleagues and secretaries

were asked "How can I get a child some new clothes?" or "What have you got on enmeshed families?" This appeared to be basic information collecting. At other times, the same professional could be observed "bouncing off" ideas with the same colleague: "Do you think it will work if I do such-and-such?" In this case, the activity was not information-gathering, but rather affirmation of a proposed action which was formulating in the practitioner's mind. Five such functions which the sources or agents provided could be observed: information; confirmation; affirmation of the individual; reflection, and protection. Not all agents provided all functions, for example, peers and especially supervisors, seemed to provide protection against client or senior administrative actions towards the practitioners.

4. Many individual and environmental forces mediate what Knowledge is used, and how it is used At least eighteen factors could be identified as influencing Knowledge use in the workplace. Some, such as the professional's role and beliefs, time, and complexity of the required Knowledge were more related to the ability of the individual to learn or problem-solve at any given time. For example, if time was unavailable, practitioners would appear to use whatever repetoire of skills and insights they already had. However, if they had time, and the problem was perplexing, they could be observed spending time reading or consulting others to gain greater clarity about the issue or problem and possible solutions.

Some of the forces seemed to be more related to the environment in which the social worker worked. These were less ameliorable by the individual. Organization's purpose, the nature of the client, and availability of resources are examples of this set of factors.

In order for Knowledge to be actually used, at least four sets of conditions appeared to be necessary. First, the professional needed to be receptive, willing and able to learn. Second, she or he needed to be willing and able to apply that new insight, idea, skill, or whatever. Third, there would have to be an opportunity to learn or acquire the requisite Knowledge. Finally, there would have to be the opportunity to apply that Knowledge. Unless these four conditions were present, one would not really know if indeed new Knowledge, as seen from a field perspective, existed.

Upon reflection, it becomes apparent that the actual application of Knowledge depends on a large number of variables and conditions. Many of these are beyond the control of the individual social worker. Most are beyond the control of the educator.

Discussion

As viewed from the field, the actual application of Knowledge to practitioner problems is far more complex than our traditional approaches to social work instruction are equipped to cope with. Regardless of the way in which we may try to improve class-based instruction, the impact will often be negligible.

It is apparent that some types of practical Knowledge are not even recognized as legitimate Knowledge, even though coping Knowledge and Knowledge of self, for example, seem to be an important part of social work practice.

The interaction between kinds of Knowledge, and agents of Knowledge development, with multiple individual and environmental forces,(all of which have an impact on how the client is finally served) suggests a new model of teaching needs to be considered.

Mezirow (1981) has suggested different "domains" of learning: instrumental, dialogic and self-reflective. Recognition needs to be given in social work education that not all learning is the same. For example, self-reflective learning, or the way in which we come to understand ourselves, very much relates to the coping Knowledge and Knowledge of self and how we learn, as identified in this study. Most opportunities for this kind of learning come from life itself, including our professional work. Similarly, parallels can be seen between Mezirow's dialogic learning, in which individuals learn consensual norms, as a large part of what has been labelled in this study Knowledge of sub-systems and how to access them. This too, is a critical part of practice wisdom. Again, opportunities for this kind of learning exist mostly from workplace and life experiences.

Finally, much learning of social work practice occurs in situations which are unplanned and not at all organized for the purpose of learning. Marsick and Watkins (forthcoming), citing Carnevale, suggest that most time and money is spent on informal and incidental learning in organizations.

Implications for Social Work Education

The data presented can only be regarded as suggestive. More elaborate and systematic studies must be undertaken before one may state with any sense of certainty that these findings have general application. Nonetheless, a growing number of researchers and observers, including those referred to in this paper, have independently corroborated some of these findings.

At the very least, we must open our eyes to the possibilities that more effective approaches to facilitating social workers' learning should be examined and that the traditional, class-based models as used in social work degree education, continuing education, and staff development, may be limited. We can at least consider supplementing our present educational approaches with some alternates.

Such alternates include developing and improving the field-based learning or practice which schools of social work already incorporate into their program designs. The development of Knowledgeable, experienced master practitioners/teachers who are able to understand the learning process and maximize the value of learning in the field is one such thrust. Similarly, helping pre-professionals develop self-directing learning competences, as Farquharson (1982) suggests, is another such thrust. The development of mentoring (Wilcox, 1987) and coaching skills (Yakowicz), as well as embracing Action Science (Argyris, 1985) and Action Learning (Mezirow, 1981) are promising directions.

Each of these newer thrusts rests on an assumption that workplace learning is a fertile ground for enhancing social workers Knowledge. It further assumes that the complexities involved in learning make it a unique, idiosyncratic activity which can best be enhanced through the work environment. Similarly, to help professionals learn effectively means to individualize the learning support systems so that through the proper interface between reflection and observation with experience, learning becomes more than a rote activity - that it becomes meaningfully established in the repetoire of the practitioner.

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